DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 602 CS 211 854

AUTHOR Aiex, Nola Kortner
TITLE Literature as Lessons on the Diversity of Culture.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jun 89
CONTRACT RI88062001
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Childrens Literature; Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Education; *Cultural Pluralism; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Literature Appreciation
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Ethnic Literature

ABSTRACT

Television in the late 1980s has offered even the occasional viewer an almost dizzying picture of other peoples and cultures, thanks in part to the rapid technological advancement of satellite communication systems. At the same time, a recent survey of the most widely assigned literary works in high schools found that the high school canon changed very little between 1963 and 1989. The ERIC database provides several resources for administrators and teachers who wish to offer their students varied literary and cultural experiences. The classroom teacher is undoubtedly the most important element in any literature program that encompasses cultural themes. An interested teacher can learn much about the cultural characteristics (and negative stereotypes) of the cultural groups represented in the classroom. The general theme of multi-ethnic literature can be simple: diversity. The study of diversity of cultures offers schools a richer potential than does uniformity or monoculture. (MM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON READING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

June 1989 DIGEST

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED306602

Literature as Lessons on the Diversity of Culture

by Nola Kortner Aiex

Television in the late 1980s has offered even the occasional viewer an almost dizzying picture of other peoples and other cultures, thanks in part to the rapid technological advancement of satellite communication systems. At the same time, a just-reported survey of the most widely assigned literary works in high schools, conducted by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature at the State University of New York at Albany, found that the high school canon changed very little between 1963 (the year of the last similar survey) and 1989. High school students still read the same classic novels and plays that were read 25 years ago, even in schools with large minority populations. (*USA Today*)

Without arguing the relative merits of classic versus popular or traditional versus ethnic literature—points of disagreement even among educators and literary specialists— this digest will review the resources available in the ERIC database for teachers and administrators who wish to offer their students varied literary and cultural experiences.

One teacher has expressed her rationale in the following manner: "If teachers are to help children become more humane, they need to help boys and girls appreciate the dignity and beauty of other ethnic groups who are different than they." (Carlson, 1971) She continues in the same vein: "A child who is one of a minority group suffers from some form of 'triple loneliness'—a feeling that his or her cultural heritage is being trampled upon, that this heritage is being denied, and that a particular language dialect is being frowned upon by teachers who lack an understanding of his or her ethnic identity."

CS211854

Building multicultural understanding

Concentrating on helping children gain self-acceptance, Stoddard (1983) considers children's literature an excellent medium to introduce global concepts and to bridge multicultural understanding. She believes that literature can provide children with a more accurate picture of world reality and a sensitivity to cultural differences. Accordingly, she chooses and discusses about 40 well-written books for young children that illustrate how various cultures live.

Ranta (1978) has developed material for a comprehensive course on American literature for boys and girls in grades K-8 that is based on the concept of the United States as a pluralistic society. It can be easily adapted for use as a unit within the typical established course on literature for children required of preservice teachers in many institutions teaching elementary education. An extensive booklist forms the basis of the course, with sections on the American Black, the American Indian, the Puerto Ricans on the mainland, the Chicanos, the Jewish-Americans, and the Oriental-Americans. Sample assignments are also included.

Sims (1982) focuses on literature about American Blacks. In her monograph, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction*, she provides teachers, librarians, and teacher-educators in the field of children's literature with information that will enable them to make informed selections of books for and about American Blacks. She includes books for young people from preschool through eighth grade, and she bases her selections on a survey and analysis of 150 books of contemporary realistic fiction about Blacks published between 1965 and 1979.

Appropriate for use with both high school and college students, a special issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin* (Mat-thews, 1982) offers suggestions for teaching multiethnic literature. Black, Jewish-American, Chinese-American, and Native-American literature are some of the topics discussed. The article on Native-American literature outlines steps for the study of poetry by a class group (four students): 1) review principles of poetry: Method (arrangement, shape, and order), Matter (what the poem says), and Manner (mood and idea); 2) locate several collections of contemporary Native-American poetry to

review; 3) draw up a list of questions to ask particular poets if one could be chosen for a personal interview; 4) select one poet to investigate in depth; 5) select several traditional Native-American poems for review, and share the findings with the rest of the class in oral interpretations of the poems; and 6) write a short paper analyzing the use of nature as a theme in contemporary Native-American poetry. Post-reading activities include panel discussions and an evaluation of the image versus the reality of the Native American (Sasse, 1982).

Bunker and Kalivoda (1975) believe that studying the culture embedded within a literary work can serve to bring into better focus the aesthetic qualities of the work by providing a fuller appreciation of the author's artistry and skill in portraying people, things, and events within the framework of any number of cultural themes.

The concept of culture can also be broken down into smaller components if a teacher feels that studying the entire culture of America or even of an individual ethnic group is too daunting a prospect. Erisman (1979) has developed a unit on western regionalism and awareness of place, while Brennan (1981) has developed a similar unit on Appalachian literature and culture for use with high school students.

Brennan's unit on Harriet Arnow's novel *The Dollmaker* takes 10 weeks to complete. The first week the teacher presents background on the geography, flora, fauna, history, and language of the region. After that comes the study of the novel, a film on strip mining, daily class discussion and occasional quizzes. During the final three weeks, students prepare and present demonstrations on one of the arts and crafts indigenous to the Appalachian region. Lesson plans are provided with the unit, as are selected bibliographies of resources, films, poetry, prose, folklore, drama, music and dance, arts and crafts, and regional background materials.

Learners as special audiences

Complementing Sims's monograph, Brooks (1985) presents a resource volume for teachers of Black students at all levels. The book suggests incorporating other arts, such as music, film, photography, and craft-making into the study of the literature of other cultures or other countries. She feels that literature and reading should not be taught in short isolated time segments.

To appeal to a student body that contained individuals mostly following business and technical courses, one community college restructured its sophomore American literature program to focus on concepts and themes rather than on chronology or on literary movements (Dziech, 1979). This change placed a much greater emphasis on the cultural aspects of the material and was easier for non-literature majors to follow.

For example, American Lit I—a study of the principal authors of early American literature, and American Lit II—a study of the principal authors of later American literature, were revised into 1) Strangers in a Strange Land: The American Ethnic Experience—literary approaches to the experiences of selected ethnic groups; 2) Culture and Counter-Culture: American Lifestyles—literary approaches to various American environments (*e.g.*, frontier, rural, urban, com- munal); 3) Divinity: Affirmation and Denial—selected readings reflecting American authors' views of the existence and nature of God; 4) Utopia: The American Dream of Perfectibility—selected readings illustrating the hope for a perfect society; 5) Conformity/Non-Conformity: The Individual versus Society—an examination of the American struggle to define freedom and responsibility; and 6) The Paradox of Material Success: The Luxury of Integrity—literary approaches to the issues of wealth and poverty in America.

The teacher's primary role

The classroom teacher is undoubtedly the most important element in any literature program that encompasses cultural themes. An interested teacher can learn much about the cultural characteristics (and negative stereotypes) of the cultural groups represented in the classroom. Usually, the approach to another culture is either a positive one of willingness to accept what is different, or a negative one of unconscious fear and rejection. It is up to the teacher to perceive any possible problems or negative attitudes in advance so that he or she can be alert and able to guide the students in the proper direction.

The general theme of multi-ethnic literature can be simple: *diversity*. The study of diversity of cultures offers schools a richer potential than does uniformity or monoculture. As Patterson (1982) explains, the role of the teacher in multi-ethnic literature is not to praise one culture over another, but to

accept and develop each child as a unique individual, because of and apart from his or her culture.

References

Brennan, Joan H. "Appalachian literature and culture: A teaching unit for high school students," 1981. 43pp. [ED 209 048]

Brooks, Charlotte K., *et al.* (Eds.) *Tapping Potential: English and Language Arts for the Black Learner.* Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1985. 334 pp. [ED 252 886]

Bunker, Duane F., and Kolivoda, Theodore B. "Analyzing culture in Spanish literature." *Studies in Language Education,* No. 19, Georgia University Department of Language Education, 1975. 22 pp. [ED 122 627]

Carlson, Ruth Kearney. "To humanize people or to make the hearts strong." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association, 1971. 23 pp. [ED 053 874]

Dziech, Billie. "The role of the humanities in vocational and technological programs." Paper presented at the 59th Annual Convention of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, 1979. 11 pp. [ED 175 506]

Erisman, Fred. "Western regionalism and awareness of place." Paper presented at the 69th Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, 1979. 14 pp. [ED 178 921]

Matthews, Dorothy (Ed.) "Multi-ethnic literature: Help for the English teacher. Tips on selecting and teaching works by: Jewish Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Americans, and Black Americans," *Illinois English Bulletin, 69* (3) 1982, 58 pp. [ED 213 043]

Patterson, Lucille J. "The role of the teacher in multiethnic literature." In Dorothy Matthews (Ed.) *Multi-Ethnic Literature: Help for the English Teacher. Tips on Selecting and Teaching Works by: Jewish Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Americans, and Black Americans,* pp. 46-54. *Illinois English Bulletin, 69* (3), 1982. 58 pp. [ED 213 043]

Ranta, Taimi M. "Literature for children and young people in a pluralistic, multicultural society." Illinois State University, 1978. 57 pp. [ED 163 473]

Sasse, Mary. "Teaching Native American literature: Some problems and some solutions." In Dorothy Matthews (Ed.) *Multi-Ethnic Literature: Help for the English Teacher. Tips on Selecting and Teaching Works by: Jewish Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Americans, and Black Americans,* pp. 15-36. *Illinois English Bulletin, 69* (3), 1982. 58 pp. [ED 213 043]

Sims, Rudine. *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Fiction.* Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982. 116 pp. [ED 215 369]

Stoddard, Ann H. "Teaching worldmindedness through children's literature." Paper presented at the 21st Annual Meeting of the Florida Reading Association, 1983. 11 pp. [ED 243 152]

USA Today, May 31, 1989.

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Reading and Communication Skills
Indiana University
Smith Research Center
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 150
Bloomington, IN 47408
(812) 855-5847

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062001. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.